

Battle Hymn of the Republic Lyrics



Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord

S

Quick Thought

In this line, Julia Ward Howe voices the common 19th-century belief that the Second Coming of Jesus Christ was going to happen sometime in the near future.

Deep Thought

Christianity has always taught that Jesus Christ would return, but Christians have held—and still hold—differing beliefs over what the return would look like and how soon it might happen.

At the time "Battle Hymn" was written, believers would have connected this line with the Second Coming, because during the 19th century, American Christians believed it was on its way. 19th-century Christian denominations also believed that this Second Coming would play a part in bringing in something they called the millennium, a thousand-year period of perfect peace and prosperity. Some people thought this period would occur before Christ's return, and some thought it would happen afterward.

But what about the line itself? It tells us a lot about the feeling and the subject of this song. The Christian God it describes is impressive, arriving in a blaze of glory. We don't know what he's here for yet, but we get a strong sense of his power.

As the opening line, it's got to be important, right? But it's tough to tell exactly what this is about. What does "glory" mean here? What does it suggest or symbolize?

We think it's a way of describing all the things that Howe thinks are amazing, wonderful, and fascinating about God. It's crucial for us to realize that God's glory is a good thing in this poem, *but* it also has an uncontrollable, unknown, terrifying side.

He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored

S

Quick Thought

Aside from the opening, this might be the most famous line in the song. (Oh, hey, *Grapes of Wrath*.) And yes, it *is* a weird line.

Deep Thought

(1) A vintage is an old-fashioned word for the place where you make wine. (2) So, what the heck are the "grapes of wrath"?

To explain, we'll go over to Isaiah, our Bible correspondent. Isaiah?

Isaiah: *Thanks, folks. This image of God stomping on grapes shows up a bunch of times in the Old and New Testaments. Mostly it has to do with a ticked off God. For example, **Revelation 14:19** describes how, upon God's order, "the angel swung his sickle to the earth and gathered the clusters from the vine of the earth, and threw them into the great wine press of the wrath of God."*

*And not to toot my own horn, but if you look to my book, **Isaiah 63:3**, you'll find another example, where God says, "I have trodden the wine trough alone, and from the peoples there was no man with Me. I also trod them in My anger and trampled them in My wrath." Or something like that. The bottom line is that this is an image of God taking his righteous revenge on sinful mankind. Back to Shmoop.*

Thanks, Isaiah. You've also probably heard a piece of this line in another context. In 1939, John Steinbeck drew from Julia Ward Howe's line for the title of his novel about the Great Depression, ***The Grapes of Wrath***.

Like Howe, Steinbeck wanted to call attention to human evil and the issues of the day. His novel traces the migration of a family of sharecroppers as they travel from Oklahoma to California. It discusses how people's flawed values could have gotten them into a situation as bad as the **Great Depression**, a period in American history where people were just as desperate as they were during the **Civil War**.

He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword

S

Quick Thought

In Howe's hymn, the Last Judgment is good news, but it's sure going to sting first. Howe runs through a bunch of different descriptions of how mad God is, just to make sure we get the message.

Deep Thought

God is coming to judge mankind with all his power, shooting out lightning and swinging a mighty sword. The link between lightning and holy power is really old. Just think of the Greek god Zeus, who also controlled the lightning.

At the same time, there's something strange about this line, too. Why would there be lightning coming from His sword? It doesn't make sense logically, but the figurative language definitely adds to the dramatic effect. Oh, yeah. And it's God, so His sword can do whatever it wants.

God wields a vengeful sword in several Biblical passages. **Isaiah 27:1** describes the punishment that will be imposed upon Babylon and its brutal king, who has oppressed the Jews: "In that day the LORD will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, With His fierce and great and mighty sword." **Revelation 19:15** also talks about God's "sharp sword."

So much for those visions you had as a kid of God looking like Santa Clause in a white robe...

AD



I have seen Him in the watch-fires of a hundred circling camps



Quick Thought

The images here are based on Howe's visits to the Union Army camps during the **Civil War**.

Deep Thought

In this line, Julia Ward Howe expresses her conviction that God was on the side of the Union and present in the camps of the Northern army.

The "watch-fires" she's talking about are the fires that soldiers build while they're standing guard. She wants us to imagine a hundred camps, full of soldiers, glittering with firelight, and God in every one. This army is so holy, and their cause so righteous, that God travels with them.

Of course, Southerners were just as certain that God was on their side. A wave of revivals passed through Confederate camps during the war. Army chaplains and visiting ministers reported tens of thousands of conversions among the troops.

These men, they explained, had seen the light and turned over their lives to God. Many Southerners kept appealing to God even after they lost the war. Southern ministers continued to pray that God would punish the Northern aggressors, and as He had for other long-suffering chosen peoples, ultimately avenge their defeat.

AD



Let the Hero, born of woman, crush the serpent with his heel,
Since God is marching on



Quick Thought

Howe lays another Biblical reference on us here, this time to the snake that tempted Eve.

Deep Thought

The **third book of Genesis** tells us what happened between Eve and the serpent in the Garden of Eden. After Eve eats the forbidden fruit, she, Adam, and all of their descendents are punished.

But the serpent is also punished: he is forced to crawl on his belly and eat dust. In Genesis 3:15, God promises the snake that Eve and all her descendents will hate him, and one of them will "bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel."

The "Hero" of Howe's line is Jesus, who was "born of woman" and so was a descendent of Adam and Eve. The serpent represents evil, which the hero will destroy.

This line is saying that the Second Coming of Christ is here, and that mankind will finally triumph over sin. Howe is suggesting that the Northerners who are fighting are doing God's work. Jesus crushes the serpent, the North crushes the slave-holding South, and "God is marching on."

AD



As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free

S

Quick Thought

Here, Howe suggests that the men fighting for the North should sacrifice their lives to free the slaves, just as Jesus sacrificed his life to redeem humankind.

Deep Thought

The intensity of the song picks up with this line. Howe tells us that Jesus sacrificed himself to free the world from sin ("died to make men holy"). If we follow Him, we need to be willing to sacrifice something, too. He died for holiness, but the soldiers and the people of the Union need to be ready to die for freedom.

See what she did there? She just tied together Christianity, the Civil War, and slavery. If you're a true Christian soldier, you need to **fight to end slavery**. Whatever you think of the beliefs the speaker expresses, it's hard to deny how well she weaves it all together at the end.

This is also a good opportunity to talk about how churches themselves had been facing internal problems by the time the **Civil War** rolled around. Evangelical churches grew dramatically through the first half of the 19th century, but divisions arose among them in the years before and during the Civil War.

The Methodists were among the first to experience this divide. Recognizing that regional beliefs about slavery could not be reconciled, the denomination split into two conferences, one for the North and one for the South, in 1844. Southern Baptists separated from Northern Baptists the following year.

Northern and Southern members of the Presbyterian Church managed to contain their differences for a bit longer, largely because the denomination had divided earlier over other issues into New School and Old School Presbyterians. In 1857, though, about 15,000 Southern Presbyterians broke away from New School Presbyterians over disagreements about slavery.